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# City Grants Vaccine Mandate Exemptions For Hundreds Of Public School Employees

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 Students at PS 59 in Queens in September 2021  
[NYC SCHOOLS CHANCELLOR TWITTER](#)  
([HTTPS://TWITTER.COM/DOECHANCELLOR/STATUS/1437503290787471369/PHOTO/2](https://twitter.com/DOECHANCELLOR/STATUS/1437503290787471369/PHOTO/2))

Over 500 public school employees have officially been granted medical or religious exemptions to the city's vaccination mandate (<https://gothamist.com/news/nyc-public-schools-issue-full-covid-vaccine-mandate-all-staff>). But union leaders warned that many Department of Education staffers in non-teaching positions remain unvaccinated, which could leave schools short-staffed next week.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has imposed a strict policy on DOE employees (<https://gothamist.com/news/de-blasio-confident-vaccine-mandate-school-staff-will-overcome-legal-challenges>) who must show proof of at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by the end of Monday, September 27th. After legal challenges by unions representing DOE workers, the city was forced to carve out exemptions for medical or religious reasons (<https://gothamist.com/news/nyc-must-give-teachers-medical-and-religion-exemptions-non-classroom-work-arbitrator-finds>). De Blasio has said the religious exemptions would also be limited to "two well-established religions, Christian Science and Jehovah's Witnesses, that have a history on this, of a religious opposition." The mayor warned those exemptions would be rare.

"What we're seeing so far is a very small number of requests for medical or religious exemption. Only in the hundreds have been approved so far," de Blasio told WNYC's Brian Lehrer Friday. "And again, there's well over 100,000 teachers and staff, and we're going to work with anyone who needs to get vaccinated between now and the deadline."

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As of Friday, "81% of all DOE employees have received at least one dose of the vaccine," said Katie O'Hanlon, a spokesperson for the DOE in a statement. She noted that 87% of teachers have received at least one dose.

"The vast majority of employees have been vaccinated and the number will continue to rise over the coming days," she added. "We administered 7,000 vaccinations on school campuses across the city last week, hired thousands of new teachers and staff, and have a large reserve of qualified workers who are ready to fill in if needed."

There are about 11,000 substitute teachers available, and an unspecified number of educators working in the DOE central offices who may be deployed to schools as well, according to the DOE. The substitute teachers and central office employees will have at least one dose of the vaccine.

O'Hanlon did not immediately respond to questions about the number of applications for exemptions the DOE has received, or what guidelines the department is using for approving applications.

Staff who qualify for medical and religious exemptions can switch to assignments outside the classroom. Teachers who don't qualify for these exemptions but still refuse to get vaccinated have to either take unpaid leave and can keep their health

insurance, or they can resign and get severance.

The city's teacher and principal unions continued to push back against the Monday deadline (<https://gothamist.com/news/fearing-staff-shortage-nyc-teacher-and-principal-unions-push-delay-vaccination-mandate>), saying the short timeframe will leave many schools seriously understaffed next week if thousands of unvaccinated teachers and staff are forced to stay home.

"At this point, principals and superintendents have been reaching out consistently to tell us that they are concerned about not having enough staff come Tuesday morning, September 28th," said Mark Cannizzaro, president of the Council of School Supervisors & Administrators union in a press conference Friday. "I've heard from several schools that have anywhere between 30 and 100 people currently on a non-compliant list."

One of the biggest worries was losing critical numbers of support staff including cafeteria workers and school safety agents, Cannizzaro said.

"It's not just teachers and administrators that are needed in schools. We need to have our custodial staff, our paraprofessionals, our kitchen staff, our school aides, and of course our school safety agents," Cannizzaro said.

Most schools may face having only one school safety agent next week. "Principals were told yesterday that school safety agents would be redeployed, and schools would probably get one safety agent per school," he said.

Gregory Floyd, president of the Local 237 union, which includes school safety agents and food service managers who supervise cafeteria workers, estimated that half the union's membership might still be unvaccinated.

He's urged hesitant members to go get their shots. "Everyone is going to have to make an individual choice," Floyd told WNYC/Gothamist. "Are you going to join your colleagues who are vaccinated and working beside you? They're healthy. Look at them."

De Blasio, who has continuously argued that New York City's public schools will remain safely open this fall because of the vaccine, said DOE staff still have time to go get vaccinated. The DOE said there will be pop-up vaccination clinics at schools with students ages 12 and up next week.

"There's all of today, there's all of tomorrow. There's all of Sunday, even into Monday to get vaccinated," de Blasio said Friday. "The vast, vast majority of teachers and staff are making the decision to get vaccinated, be part of the solution, and continue with their work."

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